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"If You Fly to the Sky, I Can Catch You by Your Feet"

Beijing's Transnational Authoritarian Control of Uyghur Diaspora Research and Documentation Efforts

ABSTRACT This article examines the People's Republic of China's (PRC) strategies of Transnational Authoritarian Control targeting Uyghur diaspora researchers and activists, and their impact on documentation efforts concerning human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Drawing on interviews with eleven researchers and documenters, including a co-author, this study reveals the primary mechanisms that obstruct evidence collection, discredit researchers, foster fear and self-censorship, induce psychological distress, and erode social cohesion among the Uyghur diaspora. While the PRC targets researchers through direct Transnational Repression (TNR), we identify a strategic evolution toward Transnational Co-Optation (TNC). Beijing utilizes inducements like leveraging conditional access to the homeland to induce acquiescence and collaboration. This profoundly undermines documentation efforts by reducing witness participation and fragmenting the diaspora. To address these shifts, we propose a multidimensional framework for analyzing Transnational Authoritarian Control that widens the analytical scope beyond repression. We introduce the dimension of "transgressiveness" (violation of international rules and norms), arguing that the PRC strategically favors tactics high in impact yet low in transgressiveness. This erodes diaspora cohesion and documentation efforts while minimizing international scrutiny and evading host-nation countermeasures. This article thus bridges empirical findings on researcher targeting with a conceptual re-evaluation of authoritarian reach.

KEYWORDS China, Uyghurs, transnational authoritarianism, transnational repression, transnational co-optation

INTRODUCTION

The early 21st century has witnessed a resurgence of authoritarian practices, characterized by their increasing sophistication and diffusion beyond national borders. Among these innovations, forms of what we refer to as Transnational Authoritarian Control, including its primary mechanism of Transnational Repression (TNR), have emerged as a strategy encompassing diverse tactics to monitor, influence, coerce, and silence political exiles, dissidents, and diaspora populations. Variously referred to as transnational or extraterritorial repression, transnational authoritarianism, or extraterritorial security practices, TNR constitutes not merely a series of isolated incidents or practices, but an increasingly systematic and normalized aspect of illiberal statecraft (Dukalskis et al. 2022; Glasius 2018; Tsourapas 2021).

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As the rise and evolution of such practices have become linked to increased international migration and rapid technological progress, illiberal regimes now routinely incorporate TNR into their modus operandi. Since the early 2010s, these tactics have gained widespread adoption, including by dozens of non-democratic states (Schenkkan and Linzer 2021).

Consequently, understanding TNR, and related forms of what we refer to as Transnational Co-Optation (TNC) and Transnational Legitimation (TNL), as an emerging field of cross-disciplinary inquiry has become essential for grasping how states maintain control, manage dissent, and navigate the complexities of a globalized world where political contestation defies straightforward territorial containment. While all states (including democracies) exercise transnational political control, we define the PRC's strategy as Transnational Authoritarian Control to highlight how states externalize their three domestic security pillars (repression, co-optation, and legitimation) to neutralize extraterritorial dissent.

This article addresses gaps in the current literature through two interrelated contributions. Empirically, we analyze the targeting of accountability researchers and the shift in methods of transnational control over the Uyghur diaspora. Conceptually, we widen the analytical scope beyond repression (TNR) to include other methods of control (co-optation and legitimation), leading to the proposition of a new concept, Transnational Authoritarian Control. The study grounds these contributions by examining practices of the People's Republic of China (PRC) against Uyghurs, a predominantly Turkic ethnic group in the PRC's northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), known to Uyghurs as the "homeland" or East Turkestan (Roberts 2020). Historically, sizable Uyghur communities have existed in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye (UHRP 2023). These diaspora populations expanded as the coercive assimilation and political re-education policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intensified. In July 2009, protracted tensions between the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese over assimilationist ethnic policies culminated in violent clashes in Ürümchi, Xinjiang's capital. Beijing responded with intensified securitization (Zenz 2025). From 2017 onward, the Chinese party-state's regional policies escalated into a campaign of extrajudicial internment, with potentially over one million Uyghurs and other ethnic groups held in re-education camps (Smith Finley 2019; Zenz 2019). In 2022, a cache of evidence from XUAR police computers ("Xinjiang Police Files"), leaked by anonymous sources, further evidenced the campaign's scale and the prison-like nature of these camps (Zenz 2022).

Since 2018, scholars, rights groups, and Uyghur diaspora organizations have documented these atrocities. In 2021, the Uyghur Tribunal compiled extensive victim and expert testimony, and in August 2022, the OHCHR consolidated the various findings in a detailed report (OHCHR 2022; Uyghur Tribunal 2021a). These evidence-gathering processes, essential for informing policy responses, relied heavily on Uyghur researchers, documenters, translators, witness testimony, and community support. Facing mounting international criticism, sanctions against XUAR officials, and efforts to ban imports produced with Uyghur forced labor, Beijing has sought to undermine this research by subjecting researchers, activists, and witnesses to TNR (Tobin and Elimä 2023, 2025; Safeguard Defenders 2023).

This article offers the first study examining the PRC's TNR targeting Uyghur researchers documenting the party-state's human rights abuses. Although research on the PRC's transnational repression targeting Uyghur and other XUAR ethnic diaspora communities has

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grown, the field remains nascent. Only two in-depth qualitative studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals, complemented by reports from human rights organizations and the University of Sheffield (Table 1).

Such tactics present a particular concern for the international community, as evidence of atrocities within the PRC can only be collected externally. Consequently, inadequate documentation and research impair accountability efforts and resource mobilization for affected communities. Our findings indicate that while the PRC's TNR tactics have not deterred documenters, they have profoundly impacted their mental health, witness participation, and access to community resources. Uyghur co-author Muetter Tohti (formerly Iliqud) has personally experienced TNR (Iliqud 2021; *The Guardian* 2022). Her experiences are incorporated into our analysis.

Additionally, we conducted interviews to investigate the effects of the PRC's recent open-door policy, allowing diaspora Uyghurs to visit their homeland and Uyghur citizens to visit abroad. Such access depends on acquiescence and, in some cases, participation in PRC propaganda and espionage. This strategy utilizes what we term restorative inducements: the conditional restoration of access to fundamental needs (like family contact) previously restricted by the state. These tactics have exacerbated existing diaspora divisions, as individuals who travel face stigmatization as "traitors" by those who abstain. Within the authoritarian repertoire, Transnational Co-Optation (TNC) has received far less scholarly attention than overt transnational repression (Glasius 2018; Tsourapas 2021). Meanwhile, covert repression has become increasingly popular among autocrats, being less politically costly and risky than overt repression (Guriev and Treisman 2022).

In contrast to direct repression, co-optation has a more indirect effect on documenters. As the PRC's repression and co-optation grow more effective and the Uyghur diaspora feels that activism has failed to alleviate the homeland situation, activism in Europe, Türkiye, and the US has declined. Consequently, witnesses are more reluctant to come forward, hindering documentation of rights violations. Thus, the two repressive pathways (direct repression and diffuse co-optation) reinforce each other, undermining diaspora resilience and collaboration.

Beijing's TNR strategy against documentation operates largely through lower-intensity mechanisms. This preference favors the PRC; the mechanisms are less overtly coercive but designed to undermine the diaspora's sociopsychological foundations over time. We argue this reflects a preference for tactics high in impact yet low in "transgressiveness" (minimizing violations of host-state laws or rules). This approach attracts minimal international attention, creates ambiguity for host-state countermeasures, and thwarts law enforcement, as the tactics often remain below prosecution thresholds.

In sum, the PRC's efforts targeting researchers have five major effects: (1) obstructing evidence collection, (2) fostering diaspora fear and self-censorship, (3) discrediting researchers and findings, (4) inducing psychological distress, and (5) undermining diaspora cohesion and witness willingness. Our research is based on interviews with diaspora researchers and documenters. We first situate our work within the TNR literature, then review existing research on the PRC's TNR targeting Uyghurs. Our analysis of state documents outlines the XUAR government's transnational threat perception and countereffortts. Finally, we present an empirical account of the party-state's efforts to silence, intimidate, and isolate Uyghur

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documenters and witnesses, and develop a multidimensional framework of Transnational Authoritarian Control to analyze the strategic evolution of the PRC's extraterritorial influence. While acknowledging the dimension of Transnational Legitimation (TNL), we focus our analysis primarily on repression and co-optation as the dominant mechanisms obstructing researcher activity.

AUTHORITARIANISM'S GLOBAL REACH: THE LITERATURE ON TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION AND ON THE UYGHURS

The global persistence and resurgence of authoritarianism has challenged post–Cold War assumptions about democratic ascendancy, prompting scholars to recognize that authoritarian regimes can innovate and adapt to maintain power (Gerschewski 2013; Morgenbesser 2020; Levitsky and Way 2010). TNR itself is not entirely new. Precedents include Soviet actions against émigrés (Krasnov 1985) and Operation Condor, a coordinated campaign of cross-border state terror by South American military dictatorships (Lessa 2019). However, it has intensified and become more systematized in the 21st century. This escalation stems from increased challenges posed by globalized dissent and enhanced state capabilities afforded by new technologies and international structures.Scholars suggest authoritarian regimes' expanding TNR toolkits disrupt the Westphalian model of sovereignty by asserting extraterritorial jurisdiction over populations based on nationality, ethnicity, or political threat (Glasius 2018; Michaelsen and Ruijgrok 2023). Scholars define TNR as the "attempts by regimes to punish, deter, undermine, and silence activism abroad," addressing how authoritarian regimes exert control over citizens abroad (Furstenberg et al. 2021; Moss 2021; Tsourapas 2021). In 2025, the OHCHR's first TNR Brief offered a similar definition: "acts conducted or directed by a State, or its proxy, to deter, silence or punish dissent, criticism or human rights advocacy towards it, expressed from outside its territory" (OHCHR 2025). These acts frequently "aim to instill a broader chilling effect on advocacy and dissent" (ISHR 2025). Repression by states implies coercion—the imposition of costs or threats—designed to deter activities or beliefs perceived as challenging regime authority, typically by violating personal integrity rights (Davenport 2007). The 2025 G7 statement on TNR reflects a broad interpretation of "repression," including sophisticated, covert, or indirect forms like digital smear campaigns and "direct or implicit threats against family members" (G7 2025).Transcending isolated extraterritorial acts, TNR represents a systematic, institutionalized dimension of authoritarian statecraft. It encompasses a broad spectrum of practices, from subtle forms (digital surveillance, online harassment, manipulation of consular services) to overt, violent methods: coercion-by-proxy, abuse of international legal mechanisms like Interpol notices, physical assaults, clandestine abductions, forced renditions, and assassinations (Tsourapas 2021; Dukalskis et al. 2022; Schenkkan and Linzer 2021). Heathershaw et al. (2016) identify three stages of TNR intensity: (1) intimidation/defamation/surveillance, (2) arrest/detention/abuse in the host country, and (3) coerced extradition/enforced disappearance/assassination.For authoritarian governments, TNR functions as an extension of domestic regime security, pursuing "internal security within the territory of a foreign state" (Furstenberg et al. 2021, 361). Studies show intensified domestic

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crackdowns increase subsequent TNR, as domestic repression compels dissidents to seek refuge abroad while states continue to perceive them as threats (Dukalskis et al. 2023). Scholarship increasingly recognizes that transnational strategies extend beyond repression. Glasius (2018) and Tsourapas (2021) applied Gerschewski's (2013) three pillars of domestic authoritarian stability (repression, co-optation, and legitimation) to the extraterritorial realm. Tsourapas (2021) identified these as the core components of a global authoritarian toolkit used to manage complex challenges abroad. Glasius (2018) theorized these as modes of constructing relationships: Regimes selectively include diaspora members as subjects via repression, clients via co-optation, or patriots via legitimation.

Transnational co-optation can involve material incentives, like Egypt's rewards for loyal diaspora members or China's financial inducements for "micro-espionage" aimed at "helping the motherland advance" (Tsourapas 2021, 632). Such less overt inducements are harder to measure; major TNR databases (e.g., Freedom House) only include "direct, physical cases of transnational repression," acknowledging these acts represent only a "subsection of the repressive repertoire" (Schenkkan and Linzer 2021, 1). The European Parliament's November 2025 resolution on addressing transnational repression of human rights defenders offers a TNR definition that lists the range of repressive acts in great detail, largely focusing on direct attacks or threats alongside "strategic misuse of legal instruments" and "non-physical methods" (European Parliament 2025). As such, the resolution also ignores the co-optative dimension in favor of coercion.Regimes often leverage their diplomatic capacities to enable TNR strategies through intelligence gathering, communication with host-state authorities, and co-opting non-state actors to assist in repressive efforts (Lemon et al. 2023). Across post-communist contexts, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) functions as a key multilateral mechanism enabling such efforts. Founded in 2001 by the PRC and several Central Asian states, the SCO's "Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure" framework has formalized extradition and rendition processes for individuals suspected of terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Furstenberg et al. 2021).

Existing Research on TNR Targeting Uyghurs

A 2021 report found that the PRC's TNR efforts are "unparalleled" in their "sheer breadth and global scale," affecting Han Chinese and ethnic populations in at least 36 host countries (Schenkkan and Linzer 2021, 15). Within this context, the Uyghur diaspora has become a particularly vulnerable target group alongside increased repression in Xinjiang. Table 1 summarizes reports on Beijing's transnational repression against Uyghurs and other XUAR-based ethnic groups.

Based on the literature above, the PRC employs a diverse range of tactics to control and silence Uyghurs abroad. These include surveillance and digital threats via cyberattacks and hacking; coercion-by-proxy exploiting familial ties in China; and human intelligence networks gathering data through Xinjiang authorities, diplomatic missions, or diaspora informants. Beijing manipulates international legal and diplomatic platforms, such as Interpol, to harass and detain individuals, alongside direct repression and rendition, frequently with host-country complicity and in violation of international conventions. Furthermore, the CCP's United Front Work Department and its proxies utilize material benefits and

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TABLE 1. List of Published Reports on PRC TNR Against Uyghurs

Title	Objectives	Sources
Academic Studies		
"Globalizing Minority Persecution: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs" (Lemon et al. 2023)	Introduces the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset.	Dataset documents 7,108 cases of TNR in 44 states (1997–2021). Data derived from public reports and existing datasets.
"China's Transnational Repression Against Uyghurs: The Case of Uyghurs in Türkiye" (Uluyol 2024)	Explores PRC's TNR against Uyghurs in Türkiye.	Survey data from 93 Uyghurs in Türkiye and 17 in-depth interviews with TNR victims.
"'We Are Living in Fear': Transnational Repression, Regime Type, and Double Precarity in the Uyghur Diaspora" (Lemon and Jardine 2024)	Examines how PRC TNR varies by regime type.	Nineteen in-depth interviews with Uyghurs living around the world and a dataset of over 7,000 incidents of China's targeting of Uyghurs.
"The Enemy of My Friend Is My Enemy: Chinese Leaders' Foreign Visits and Transnational Repression of Uyghurs" (Oztig and Karluk 2025b)	Countries frequently visited by Chinese leaders are more likely to comply with China's interest in repressing Uyghur diasporas.	Dataset of Chinese leaders' foreign visits and incidents of Uyghur repression between 1997 and 2021.
China's High-Tech Repression Against Uyghurs: Novel Theoretical Insights (Oztig and Karluk 2025a)	Details China's use of information and communication technologies for TNR within Türkiye.	Assesses transnational repression against Uyghurs through surveys and interviews with Uyghurs in Türkiye.
Reports by Think Tanks or Rights Groups		
Repression Across Borders: The CCP's Illegal Harassment and Coercion of Uyghur Americans (UHRP 2019)	Details Beijing's TNR against Uyghur Americans.	Ten interviews with Uyghurs primarily based in Virginia, USA.
Nowhere Feels Safe: Uyghurs Tell of China-Led Intimidation Campaign Abroad (Amnesty International 2020)	Details China's global campaign of intimidation against Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim ethnic groups abroad.	Information from 400 Uyghurs and Kazakhs, 2018–19.
Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach (Schenkkan and Linzer 2021)	Overview of TNR worldwide with a section on China.	Identifies 214 cases of TNR against PRC diaspora, based on open-source reports and media reporting.

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TABLE 1. (*continued*)

Title	Objectives	Sources
No Space Left to Run: China's TNR of Uyghurs (Jardine et al. 2021)	China's TNR campaign against Uyghurs in 28 countries.	"China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset" with 1,546 TNR cases of detention and deportation (1997–2021).
"Nets Cast from the Earth to the Sky": China's Hunt for Pakistan's Uyghurs (Jardine and Evans 2021)	Case study of TNR in Pakistan.	Analyzes 21 cases and up to 90 reported incidents in Pakistan and Afghanistan, based on interviews and open sources.
"'We Know You Better Than You Know Yourself': China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghur Diaspora" (Tobin and Elimä 2023)	Examines the scale and patterns of TNR in the Uyghur diaspora.	Interviews with Uyghurs in the UK, Türkiye, and Thailand.
Targeted in Türkiye: China's Transnational Repression Against Uyghurs (Safeguard Defenders 2023)	Similar to Uluyol (2024) listed above.	See Uluyol (2024).
Weaponized Words: Uyghur Language Software Hijacked to Deliver Malware (Brown et al. 2025)	Examines targeted phishing campaigns and other technological repression.	Analyzes cyberattacks against the World Uyghur Congress (WUC).
Preventing Transnational Repression: The Case of the Uyghur Diaspora (Tobin and Elimä 2025)	Examines civil society organizations experiencing intensifying TNR and developing mitigation tactics.	Interviewed 52 people working for 30 different organizations: 23 in Türkiye, 17 in Kazakhstan, and 12 in the UK.

promises of family contact for co-optation, while maintaining control of information through disinformation and censorship.

Our findings confirm the widespread use of these TNR methods.

Introducing the Concept of Transnational Authoritarian Control

While existing scholarship focuses heavily on repression, we argue that transnational authoritarianism represents an externalization of domestic regime security tactics in their totality (Dukalskis 2021). Therefore, we widen the analytical scope by proposing the umbrella notion of Transnational Authoritarian Control. Political control involves the exercise of state power to secure compliance, extending beyond merely compelling behavior to include the material and ideological capacity to shape the perceptions and preferences of targets

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(Lukes 2005). We define Transnational Authoritarian Control as a spectrum of extraterritorial strategies aimed at neutralizing political opposition, enforcing ideological hegemony, and managing a regime's international image. While this study examines these strategies in the context of the PRC, the concept centers on the nature of the tactics, specifically the externalization of domestic security logic, rather than on the regime type of the origin state.

We use the term "control" to signify the strategic intent to actively constrain diaspora behavior. Distinct from "influence" (implying voluntary alignment) and broader than discrete "practices" (the observable methods employed), "control" captures the systemic projection of sovereign power to enforce obedience and neutralize threats to regime stability.[1] Following Gerschewski's (2013) framework for domestic authoritarian regime security, we posit that Transnational Authoritarian Control is exercised through three primary and mutually reinforcing mechanisms, defined below: Transnational Repression (TNR), which leverages coercion; Transnational Co-Optation (TNC), which employs inducements; and Transnational Legitimation (TNL), which operates through manipulative persuasion.

While all states engage in forms of transnational political control (ranging from lawful extradition to diaspora engagement), we distinguish Transnational Authoritarian Control by its strategic intent: the externalization of domestic security pillars (repression, co-optation, and legitimation) to neutralize political opposition and enforce ideological conformity.

1. Transnational Repression (TNR)

TNR involves actions taken by the origin state or its proxies to impose costs on diaspora and exile populations through the violation, or threat of violation, of their physical integrity rights or basic liberties, with the intent to punish or deter political dissent (Davenport 2007). TNR relies fundamentally on coercion. It encompasses both "hard" (violence) and "soft" (surveillance, censorship) forms of repression that raise the costs of mobilization (Tilly 1978; Earl 2011).

- Mechanisms: Coercion, intimidation, physical and digital violence, legal-administrative manipulation.
- Examples: Assassinations, abductions, digital threats, spyware, Interpol abuse, coercion-by-proxy, defamation campaigns involving threats.

2. Transnational Co-Optation (TNC)

TNC involves the distribution of conditional benefits to secure loyalty, encourage collaboration, or induce political acquiescence. TNC operates through inducements rather than coercion (threats). To capture the dynamics observed in the PRC's strategy, we disaggregate TNC into two types:

- Additive Inducements: The provision of new benefits or opportunities (e.g., scholarships, business funding, prestigious appointments).
- Restorative Inducements: The conditional restoration of access to fundamental rights or needs previously restricted by the origin state (e.g., homeland access, family contact, passport renewal).

1. Glasius (2018) proposed the concept of extraterritorial authoritarian practices.

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Restorative inducements are especially effective because they leverage state-manufactured vulnerabilities. The state first imposes a deprivation (e.g., systematic denial of family contact) and then offers conditional relief in exchange for compliance. While the mechanism remains an inducement (an offer, as opposed to a coercive threat), the context of systemic deprivation means these offers exert immense psychological pressure. In reality, perpetrator states often combine inducements with coercion.

3. Transnational Legitimation (TNL)

TNL involves efforts to foster ideological hegemony and control the narrative environment abroad to enhance regime legitimacy and delegitimize opponents. TNL relies on manipulative persuasion and creates the permissive international environment necessary for targeted TNR and TNC (Dukalskis 2021). Beijing expends vast resources on increasingly sophisticated TNL efforts to cover up Xinjiang's atrocities through fabricated normalization narratives (e.g., Zhang and Hoja 2022). In 2022, Xi ordered officials to "tell the story of China's Xinjiang well" (Xinhua News Agency 2022). A focused study of TNL in the Uyghur context is beyond this article's scope.

- Mechanisms: Propaganda, disinformation, narrative manipulation, ideological (patriotic) mobilization, cultural diplomacy.
- Examples: State-sponsored media targeting the diaspora, cultural festivals, and disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting critics without resorting to threats.

Below, we examine the specific tactics documenters must contend with and analyze the impact and unique challenges that forms of Transnational Authoritarian Control, in particular TNR and TNC, create for this subgroup within the broader Uyghur diaspora. The next two sections analyze how Xinjiang's government frames its perceived threat from the Uyghur diaspora and present our findings on the impact of the Chinese party-state's extraterritorial activities on documentation efforts.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To assess TNR's impact on XUAR atrocity documentation, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven diaspora researchers and documenters in North America, Europe, and Türkiye between August 2024 and May 2025. Given the limited number of exiles engaged in this work, our interviewees constitute a strongly representative cross-section of this diaspora subsegment across age, gender, and geography. The sample comprises ten ethnic Uyghurs and one American.

Our sample includes Uyghur researcher and co-author Muetter Tohti, who experienced multiple forms of TNR while conducting research and atrocity documentation work during the Uyghur Tribunal and her employment with the Uyghur Transitional Justice Database (UTJD) (Iliqud 2021; *The Guardian* 2022; *Coda Story* 2021). Including Tohti as both researcher and participant was essential given the limited pool of Uyghur researchers and the repressive effects of TNR on documenters discussed in this article, as well as the

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particular trust required for individuals to discuss experiences of state coercion. For Tohti, co-authoring this article required constant negotiation between scholarly detachment and emotional proximity to the material. Her intimate understanding of community fears and social pressures allowed identification of subtle dynamics that external researchers could miss. Consequently, her positionality strengthened the analytical framework by grounding theoretical concepts in lived experience.

However, this proximity also created methodological challenges, namely potential over-interpretation of individual narratives and difficulty maintaining analytical distance. The process of revisiting traumatic experiences also created secondary trauma and burnout risks. These challenges were addressed through several safeguards. The close collaboration with the non-Uyghur author Adrian Zenz, who approached the material from a more conceptually-informed and emotionally-detached perspective, systematic peer review by two colleagues with expertise in conflict research, and regular debriefing sessions to separate analytical insights from emotional responses helped balance interpretive authority between insider knowledge and scholarly analysis.

To assess the growing trend within the Uyghur diaspora of traveling to and receiving visitors from Xinjiang, we conducted a separate set of interviews with Uyghurs who engaged in such travel, nearly all of whom requested anonymity. This was complemented with interviews with Uyghur diaspora members familiar with this practice's impact on exile communities, including Elfidar Iltebir, head of the Uyghur American Association (UAA).

The interviews yielded detailed accounts. The semi-structured format facilitated the exploration of emergent themes regarding PRC methods and target responses. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts guided the iterative categorization of narratives into principal domains of Transnational Authoritarian Control. Informed consent procedures ensured participants were aware of research objectives and potential implications. Where pertinent, supplementary evidentiary materials were incorporated to substantiate testimonial claims. Confidentiality and data security were maintained throughout. Two interviewees, both directly involved in research and documentation, requested anonymity. The other interviewees are detailed in Table 2.

TABLE 2. List of Interviewees

Name	Affiliation(s)	Relevant Profile
Zubayra Shamseden	Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), USA	Chinese Outreach Coordinator; engages in research, translation, and diaspora community support.
Henryk Szadziewski	UHRP, USA	Director of Research; leads and supervises research examining PRC policies.

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TABLE 2. (*continued*)

Name	Affiliation(s)	Relevant Profile
Abduweli Ayup	Independent researcher, Norway	Linguist focusing on Uyghur language policy impacts; documents diaspora narratives of state repression.
Muetter Tohti	Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation	China Studies Researcher; investigates PRC human rights abuses via the analysis of primary documents and Uyghur witness testimonies.
Jewher Ilham	Independent Uyghur rights advocate	Uyghur rights advocate/researcher; coordinates projects on state-imposed forced labor and corporate accountability.
Rizwangul Nurmuhamet	University of Sheffield, UK	Independent researcher, doctoral candidate studying the Uyghur situation.
Mamutcan Erkin	University of Karabük, Türkiye	Uyghur scholar, author, historian, doctoral candidate examining historical and political context of PRC atrocities.
Bahtiyar Omer	Uyghur Transitional Justice Database (UTJD), Norway	Uyghur rights advocate/researcher; Director, UTJD, documents diaspora narratives of state repression.
Rahima Mahmut	Stop Uyghur Genocide, UK	Uyghur interpreter and translator, Executive Director of Stop Uyghur Genocide, UK Director of WUC.

To capture the state's strategic logic, we also analyzed internal PRC documents in the following section. This primary source analysis complements our interview data, allowing us to triangulate diaspora narratives of repression against the internal directives and threat perceptions that inform the party-state's strategy of extraterritorial control.

CONTAINING THE ENEMY ABROAD: FRAMING THE PERCEIVED UYGHUR DIASPORA THREAT

This section examines internal PRC state documents from the Xinjiang Police Files (XPF 2022) obtained from the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (cf. Zenz 2022; XPF 2022; ICIJ 2022). Our analysis indicates a protracted and escalating campaign to control global narratives regarding Beijing's XUAR policies. Rooted in historical patterns of attributing internal dissent to foreign influence, this effort has evolved markedly under Xi Jinping. The authorities systematically designate Uyghur diaspora and critics as national

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security threats, providing justification for TNR tactics. Our findings confirm scholarly arguments that TNR represents a form of "external security" that can be understood as the externalization of internal (domestic) security priorities (Dukalskis 2021).

Early Framing: Foreign Influence and Domestic Stability

The CCP's Xinjiang approach has long reflected concerns about perceived external interference. As early as 1996, confidential state documents attributed Xinjiang's instability primarily to "international counterrevolutionary forces," alleging foreign instigation of "illegal religious activities" (HRW 1998, 3). In 2014, Xi Jinping ordered an all-out campaign against Uyghur resistance. Anticipating international backlash, Xi exhorted XUAR officials not to be "afraid of [. . .] hostile forces smearing Xinjiang's image," and called for "resolutely fight[ing] back" (Uyghur Tribunal 2021b). Xi's secret speeches proposed leveraging the UN to discredit organized Uyghur resistance and blacklist overseas organizations and individuals perceived as colluding with them (Uyghur Tribunal 2021b).

Intensification During Mass Internment (2017–20): Securitizing All Overseas Ties

Under Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo, the state's threat perception escalated dramatically starting in 2017. Growing international scrutiny of the mass internment campaign prompted intensified state monitoring and countermeasures. Beijing deemed any Uyghur connection to foreign countries or individuals as a grave security risk. The regime alleged "negative ideological influences" and infiltration of "terrorist tendencies" from abroad, not only via political organizations like the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), but also from non-political, community-based community groups such as the Uyghur American Association (UAA) and the broader diaspora (Shufu PSB 2018a; Tekes PSB 2018).

Xinjiang's internal police reports demonstrate sweeping and arbitrary definitions of this threat. Diaspora Uyghurs inquiring about Xinjiang-based relatives were termed "overseas terrorists" (Shufu PSB 2018b, 5). Uyghurs overseas who criticized Xinjiang's policies were deemed influenced by "separatist forces."[2] Security directives mandated investigating individuals with alleged overseas "terrorist" or "separatist" contacts, establishing systems for registering those linked to the WUC and their relatives. Guilt by association became a standard practice, exemplified by a 2014 Tekes County list of 42 former classmates of Radio Free Asia (RFA) journalist Shohret Hoshur, whom they classified as "sensitive and special" persons (Tekes PSB 2014).

The Logic of PRC Transnational Authoritarian Control

The CCP's engagement in Transnational Authoritarian Control reflects political motivations and threat perceptions articulated in internal police records. Uyghurs and other Turkic groups abroad are assessed as threats, presumed to be influenced by Muslim

2. For example, China Daily. 2019. "Jizhe shidi caifang, jiechuan haiwai fanhua renshi bianzao Xinjiang qinyou shizoong yaoyan" [Reporters conduct on-the-ground interviews, exposing rumors fabricated by overseas anti-China figures claiming their relatives in Xinjiang had gone missing.] December 24, 2019. Accessed March 2, 2026. https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/chs/zw/9041921.shtml

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beliefs, diaspora organizations, or critical Western voices. Consequently, diaspora members, particularly those affiliated with organizations, are broadly characterized as hostile forces or as colluding with them. This sweeping threat perception leads authorities to conflate diverse diaspora members under a singular threat category. Individuals or groups outside China critical of PRC policies are branded as hostile forces and potential terrorists whose activities require monitoring and suppression. This threat framing correlates with long-standing tendencies of the CCP in Xinjiang to portray state-sanctioned notions of identity as being under constant threat and hence in need of continual securitization (Tobin 2020; Zenz 2022). This logically results in acts of extraterritorial authoritarianism.

IMPACT OF BEIJING'S TNR ON UYGHUR DIASPORA RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION EFFORTS

This section examines Beijing's repertoire of TNR tactics, analyzing how technology, coercion, and misinformation are instrumentalized to intimidate potential witnesses and delegitimize researchers. Beyond individual accounts, our analysis identifies broader patterns in the regime's extraterritorial repression and assesses the impact on targeted individuals, their social capital within the diaspora, and their capacity to sustain their work.

Harassment and Intimidation as Tools of Extraterritorial Political Control

Harassment is a frequent, lower-intensity TNR method functioning primarily as psychological intimidation to deter activism and dissent through sustained pressure. Previous research identifies PRC harassment involving digital threats, spyware, and coercion-by-proxy targeting family members (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022; Schenkkan and Linzer 2021).

Social media platforms are significant arenas for state-sponsored harassment targeting researchers. Recurrent methods include death threats and symbolic imagery (e.g., tombstones). Female researchers often endure particularly egregious, gendered harassment. Jewher Ilham reported the circulation of AI-generated explicit images of herself alongside defamatory rumors. Researchers typically find ignoring such attacks is the sole recourse. Intensified harassment often coincides with new publications, advocacy initiatives, or high-profile events, suggesting calculated timing.

However, these tactics occasionally escalate from harassment to direct physical intimidation and incitement. After an academic event in Türkiye, Memutcan Erkin was publicly confronted by an individual accusing him of disseminating "false information" about Xinjiang; this person subsequently followed and intimidated Erkin and his daughter for two hours. Later, during a trip to Istanbul for a BBC project, Erkin was notified by hotel staff of four men seeking him, while associates reported inquiries about his whereabouts at community centers. This systematic effort to track and silence him ultimately forced Erkin to suspend the project.

In a comparable instance of severe intimidation involving the threat of violence, Abduweli Ayup encountered armed individuals in Türkiye. Lured by a deceptive message,

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he faced three armed individuals who explicitly warned him against documenting Uyghur testimonies or engaging with international media. Ayup recounted his coerced compliance: "I saw their guns and was terrified, so I agreed and told them I would never do it again." After relocating to Norway, Ayup faced continued harassment, ranging from harassing calls to the theft of his laptop. This pattern suggested deliberate attempts to access sensitive information.

Coercion via Familial Ties: Weaponizing Kinship Networks

Targeting family members exploits affective bonds and kinship networks as leverage to compel silence or compliance. This "coercion-by-proxy" seeks to control diaspora political activities while severing familial connections vital for cultural reproduction and information flow (Tobin and Elimä 2023).

Rahima Mahmut experienced this pressure when PRC police visited her mother for "routine inquiries" seeking her contact details, an implicit warning. For others, threats were explicit. Zubayra Shamseden received threats involving her children; her relatives in Xinjiang subsequently endured increased surveillance and designation as "persons of special concern." Government agents also attempted to coerce her brother with inducements to dissuade his sister from political activity.

Similarly, XUAR authorities compelled Bahtiyar Omer's mother and sister to send him messages urging him to cease his work. This harassment intensified during the 2021 Uyghur Tribunal, as Omer's organization (UTJD) supported the proceedings. Unlike direct intimidation, this instrumentalization of family ties forces researchers into a dilemma: Continue documentation at potential peril to loved ones, or prioritize family safety through coerced silence.

Tohti understood these risks and severed all family ties after a 2017 phone call with her grandmother, hoping dissociation might offer protection. The grandmother requested Tohti not call again until she would reach out "when things get better." This marked the researcher's loss of contact with all Xinjiang relatives. She later discovered police visited several relatives seeking information about her.

Role of PRC Diplomatic Missions in Extraterritorial Repression

Beijing's formal diplomatic apparatus actively participates in transnational repression. Operating under diplomatic cover, these missions target dissidents, apply political pressure, coerce collaboration, and employ administrative controls, such as passport revocation or withholding consular services, to extend state coercion into host countries.

Passport revocation, a highly coercive tactic risking statelessness, was experienced by Abduweli Ayup in Türkiye. After the PRC embassy in Ankara confiscated his passport, officials demanded he contact Xinjiang police and demonstrate "active cooperation" for renewal. Persistent police calls ensued. Facing potential statelessness, Ayup relocated to Norway with assistance from the writer's association PEN International.

Memutcan Erkin experienced similar coercion in Türkiye. After publicly discussing state abuses, a hometown police officer contacted him. A cordial conversation became a

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recruitment attempt: The officer urged Erkin to visit the PRC embassy in Ankara to help publish propaganda about Xinjiang's "harmony," promising housing and an academic return in exchange. Erkin's refusal triggered overt threats concerning his public statements and his family. He was threatened with an Interpol terrorist designation and warned of Beijing's inescapable reach: "If you fly to the sky, I can catch you by your feet, and if you dig into the earth, I can drag you by your hair." Later, a hometown police officer reported his brother was arrested for aiding his escape and was "half-dead." Ultimately, over thirty of his relatives were detained. Faced with extreme duress, Erkin sought asylum through the UNHCR.

Infiltration, Espionage, and Impersonation of Victims and Human Rights Organizations

Beyond overt coercion, a frequent TNR tactic involves infiltrating diaspora communities with informants. Beijing enlists individuals, using incentives and coercion, to gather intelligence on activists by reporting on community events and political activities. A recent high-profile case involved the arrest of Sweden-based Dilshat Reshit (WUC) for allegedly gathering intelligence for the PRC (WUC 2025).

While living in Türkiye in 2018, Abduweli Ayup encountered an individual posing as an internment camp survivor, later identified as a PRC intelligence operative. This operative, whose notebook contained surveillance notes on Uyghurs in Dubai, escalated harassment against Ayup after being interviewed. Ayup identified significant narrative inconsistencies and noted the operative's suspicious communications with China. The operative attempted to leverage Ayup for media access to share fabricated camp experiences, which Ayup declined. Ayup concluded the mission was to discredit his documentation and undermine genuine survivor testimonies.

Such impersonation attacks discredit documentation and facilitate spying on witnesses. An anonymous interviewee reported an individual masquerading as a Human Rights Watch staff member contacting a friend to solicit collaboration in collecting testimonies. Such incidents highlight significant safety concerns, even when no information is shared. Similarly, in May 2024, Bahtiyar Omer received a suspicious call from Singapore proposing collaboration and offering funding. Sensing a potential entrapment attempt, Omer terminated contact, believing the overtures were designed to probe vulnerabilities or initiate coercive recruitment. Infiltration also extends into personal lives; an anonymous interviewee detailed how PRC authorities used an informant within his social network to acquire a private Instagram post and demand information on his whereabouts.

Consistent with prior findings, PRC infiltration of the Uyghur diaspora cultivates pervasive distrust and social fragmentation (Tobin and Elimä 2023, 2025). Operatives posing as activists or survivors threaten the ethical foundations and feasibility of research with vulnerable populations. Trust, indispensable for this work, becomes fragile. Researchers face constant dilemmas regarding source assessment, interview security, and witness protection. The specter of internal betrayal imposes an additional psychological burden, erodes solidarity, and fosters factionalism within a community already traumatized by state persecution.

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Transnational Co-Optation (TNC): The Strategic Logic of Opening Borders to the Homeland

Recent developments suggest a significant strategic evolution in Beijing's Transnational Authoritarian Control strategy toward Transnational Co-Optation (TNC). Overt practices during the peak internment period (c. 2017–19), such as threats, disappearances, and intimidation, are now increasingly supplanted by mechanisms of social control, psychological coercion, and sophisticated narrative management. This evolution demonstrates that authoritarian reach involves not only repression but also co-optation and legitimation. This section draws on anonymized interviews with Uyghurs who traveled to Xinjiang, complemented by diaspora conversations that include Elfidar Iltebir, UTJD, Campaign for Uyghurs (CFU), and a well-known anonymous US-based Uyghur activist. Additional evidence includes two eyewitness audio recordings (circulated via WhatsApp and published by UTJD) and one UTJD witness account, which we independently verified.

While Beijing previously offered select diaspora access for collaboration (Safeguard Defenders 2023; Tobin and Elimä 2023), these were isolated instances. A discernible trend that began in 2023 and has accelerated since involves substantially larger numbers of Uyghurs traveling to Xinjiang for family visits, without prior state prompting. The growth of this phenomenon has been fueled by observations of diaspora visitors returning unharmed, and by relaxed visa requirements. Concurrently, some Uyghurs have relocated to Xinjiang, promoting purportedly "happy" lives on Chinese social media, while some Xinjiang residents are making family visits abroad. This development appears as a calculated state effort to project a "normalized" regional image.

One anonymous interviewee attended a government-organized tour to Xinjiang. These tours are typically organized by Chinese embassies and organizations associated with the PRC's United Front Work Department (UFWD), targeting countries with substantial Uyghur diaspora communities. Such tours aim to promote positive narratives about Xinjiang among the diaspora and cajole visiting Uyghurs to share these narratives. From 2023, this witness received annual invitations to visit Xinjiang and finally agreed to join, fearing that continued refusals might attract the attention of the PRC authorities.[3] This strategy is evidenced by a January 2026 news report detailing the arrival of 42 Xinjiang-born individuals from Türkiye for a state-coordinated homeland visit. Organized jointly by the Chinese consulate and the UFWD, the tour intended for participants to "personally witness Xinjiang's development achievements." This represents a documented instance of the party-state utilizing managed travel to shape diaspora narratives and facilitate Transnational Legitimation (*China News* 2026).

An anonymous informant based in Canada noted in their written testimony for this research that in 2024, the informant and their family, using Canadian passports, obtained visas and visited Xinjiang's capital, Ürümchi. Upon arrival in Beijing, the informant was interrogated for two hours. In an apparent attempt to gather information on the advocacy community, authorities inquired extensively about life in Canada, specifically about the informant's knowledge of Uyghur-Canadian activists, including Memet Tohti, head of the

3. Interview, June 2025.

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Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project (URAP). Consequently, the new travel regime exploits intelligence gathering through co-optation.

Another anonymous witness recounted that after arriving in Ürümchi, they were interrogated at a local police station by officers seeking information about individuals within their local jurisdictions. They showed particular interest in a young male from the same neighborhood who also lived abroad, pressing the witness for details about this individual's activities, including his affiliations. They explicitly urged the witness to encourage this man to visit Xinjiang and repeatedly sought to persuade the witness to convey within diaspora circles that conditions in Xinjiang had become "much better" and that travel to the region was safe. To support their claims, the officers falsely stated that even Rushan Abbas, a prominent Uyghur activist, had "come and stayed for a day, like many other activists," and that "nothing happened to them, they can travel freely."[4]

UTJD interviews with Uyghurs who traveled to Xinjiang between 2023 and 2024 show that all were interrogated by the Public Security Bureau (PSB) upon arrival. Diaspora visitors typically first fly to a major city, where police officers meet them and send them onward to Xinjiang after informing regional authorities of their arrival. Police told a young Uyghur girl who arrived in Beijing en route to Ürümchi:

> You are still young, so don't spend much time on the Internet. Speak less. Things have changed here a lot. Everything is good now. So, take a good look at those changes and enjoy, and tell everyone else about your good experience when you return. And if you don't want to worry about yourself and your family, then you must travel around well, and enter and exit quietly. (UTJD 2025b)

Two other Uyghurs who visited Xinjiang reported that upon arrival, they were greeted not only by family members but also by officials from the neighborhood committee (UTJD 2025a). Officials extensively questioned the two visitors about their lives abroad. One UTJD interviewee was taken to a room and lectured about "Chinese war heroes." Police then interrogated the interviewee, presenting a dossier containing extensive personal information and photographs of her abroad taken without her knowledge. The police told her: "Don't lie to us, since we know everything that you did." She also received warnings not to criticize China, or else she would risk harm to her family. The interrogation then focused on political activities abroad. She was asked to participate in diaspora events and provide detailed reports (UTJD 2025b).

Another US-based Uyghur[5] with several relatives in detention described being videotaped and forced to deliver a scripted statement praising conditions in Xinjiang and denouncing critical reporting in the Western media:

> Uyghurs are doing well, and Xinjiang is booming. News articles published by the Western media were only meant to vilify the Chinese government. [. . .] I have seen it with my own eyes, and I can tell you that everything is normal and in good condition. Uyghurs are safe and living peaceful lives.

4. Interview, June 2025.

5. Statements based on original audio recording, translations from Uyghur to English were performed by the authors.

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When this interviewee attempted to refuse cooperation, officials framed her non-compliance as a criminal offense, asserting Beijing's power and impunity:

> No country is comparable to China. [. . .] If something happens to you here, your country that issued you a passport won't be able to help you. We will throw away passports like yours as trash.

Upon her return, she faced continued harassment demanding cooperation. She feels compelled to maintain communication with the police, fearing they might release the video, which would result in her being branded a traitor by her diaspora community.

Other travelers to Xinjiang reported similar patterns. While in Xinjiang, they received offers of lucrative jobs, business funding, family travel permits, and other favors in exchange for providing intelligence. Another witness, a Uyghur-American man,[6] was told:

> In return [for favors], we want you to be our informant. If there is anything that grabs your attention in the Uyghur communities abroad, we want to be informed about that. If you cooperate well with us, we can also help to send your parents and your younger sister to you. You will be able to meet your family more frequently in the future.

When this interviewee responded reluctantly to the request, officials threatened to send his parents to a re-education camp.

Some travelers were compelled to sign non-disclosure or compliance agreements and underwent extensive interrogation before leaving Xinjiang. The young Uyghur girl was told to arrive at the airport 9–10 hours prior to departure for questioning (UTJD 2025b). The authorities assured her that they would know her every move after leaving China. Similarly, an anonymous interviewee reported that relatives in Europe who visited Xinjiang in 2024 faced a four-hour interrogation before their return. The interrogators challenged them about an East Turkestan flag displayed in their home, specifying its location to demonstrate their depth of knowledge about their life. As a result of such interactions, several respondents described lasting psychological effects after their return, including fear, anxiety, emotional instability, and suicidal thoughts.[7]

While some returnees genuinely relay their experiences of duress, others now publicly affirm state claims of harmony and development in Xinjiang during diaspora social gatherings. An anonymous respondent observed a distinction that was also shared by Elfidar Iltebir: In private settings, individuals who traveled to Xinjiang often reveal their true experience, yet in community settings, they revert to claiming that "everything is normal."[8] This trend mirrors a broader propaganda logic inspired by Xi Jinping's call to "tell Xinjiang's story well," resulting in "multi-level, omni-directional, three-dimensional propaganda about Xinjiang directed abroad" (Zhang and Hoja 2022, 7).

6. Statements based on original audio recording, translations from Uyghur to English were performed by the authors.

7. Statements based on the two original audio recordings.

8. Statement based on interviews conducted by co-author.

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As more Uyghurs travel to Xinjiang and return seemingly unharmed, risk perceptions regarding activism have shifted. Silence increasingly appears a viable strategy for family contact, while political participation is becoming undesirable. A prominent Washington, DC-based Uyghur activist noted that in 2024, Uyghur Americans were predominantly quiet about their Xinjiang travel, fearing diaspora repercussions. By 2025, however, such travel had become normalized, and individuals have been much more open about this controversial practice. This observation correlates with that of co-author Tohti, who notes a growing number of Uyghurs openly posting about homeland travel on social media. According to the anonymous activist, even some Uyghur Americans formerly outspoken against the Chinese government have visited their homeland and now refrain from all activism. As a parallel component of this apparent normalization, some Xinjiang residents have also been permitted to visit family members in the US-based diaspora. These changes are creating significant diaspora tensions as people quietly remove social media contacts, avoid contact, and question who is trustworthy. Consequently, Uyghur activists like this informant are becoming increasingly isolated and community participation in activism has significantly declined. Iltebir attributes this trend to the powerful inducement of family reunification: "They are willing to risk everything for a final visit, perhaps to see a dying parent one last time."

The PRC's strategic border reopening arguably represents a calculated shift in its strategy of Transnational Authoritarian Control, combining covert forms of coercion (TNR) with strong inducements (TNC). This complicates diaspora mobilization and research, as uncertainties regarding which returnees may have been coerced into cooperation foster suspicion and fragment the diaspora. Equally concerning is the co-optation of returnees into disseminating state propaganda, which further undermines human rights documentation. As observed by the anonymous activist, Beijing's new co-optative approach is "changing how Uyghurs in America talk, connect, and trust each other."

Community Isolation: Social Fragmentation Effects of TNR

A significant, yet under-examined, consequence of transnational repression is the social isolation and fragmentation it engenders within targeted diaspora communities. Publicly visible Uyghur researchers and advocates often endure private exclusion from the communities they seek to defend. This exclusion is a direct symptom of pervasive fear generated by TNR. Community members maintaining contact with family in the Uyghur homeland often avoid activists, fearing for their relatives' safety or attracting state attention. Consequently, outspoken researchers are frequently sidelined in social interactions, resulting in a significant loss of social capital, emotional support, and trust networks.

Jewher Ilham's experience mirrors this dynamic. Hosts disinvited Ilham from a wedding after Xinjiang police contacted them via WeChat and warned against her attendance. While Ilham empathized with their fears, the incident induced significant psychological distress and reinforced that even communal celebrations are susceptible to TNR. It prompted fears of perpetual marginalization:

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> Would I ever again be able to participate in community gatherings? Would my name forever carry the weight of threat or controversy? Could I still claim membership in a cultural space that seemed to view my presence as frightening?

Zubayra Shamseden similarly reported that her only relative abroad severed contact due to state intimidation. When community members distance themselves from activists, often driven by legitimate security concerns, this avoidance inflicts significant costs. It conveys to researchers that their work requires sacrificing social integration. TNR thus functions not only to silence critics but also to erode the social cohesion essential for sustainable documentation efforts.

Living Under Uncertainty: Precarious Security and Psychological Distress

Resettlement in democratic states offers only tenuous security for Uyghur researchers, as the assumption of protection is frequently contradicted by lived experience. Despite Norway's human rights commitments, Bahtiyar Omer described systemic indifference from its security apparatus. He reported specific TNR threats, including evidence of suspected PRC agents, to Norwegian security agencies, but these reports yielded no tangible protective or investigative action. This lack of engagement creates uncertainty about their safety and the state's capacity to counteract foreign authoritarian influence.

This uncertainty creates a significant psychological burden of constant vigilance, especially during family travel. Leisure activities become high-stress situations requiring hyper-awareness against surveillance or hostile approaches. These behaviors become normalized, defining daily routines and inducing psychological distress.

However, awareness of the transnational authoritarianism challenge has increased among Western governments, as reflected in the G7 statement (G7 2025). The US has been comparatively proactive in countering TNR. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has engaged with diaspora communities, assessed that Chinese government officials are "almost certainly" engaging in TNR against Uyghurs living in the United States, and explicitly urged victims and witnesses to report any related acts (FBI 2021).

Impact of Transnational Repression on Documentation and Research

TNR impacts researchers' safety and well-being, and undermines the integrity and viability of their professional work. The most pronounced consequence involves systematic impediments to collecting and preserving witness testimonies. A pervasive climate of fear compels witnesses to withdraw testimonies or demand erasure of information, directly obstructing accountability. Multiple researchers recounted interference with testimony collection. Abduweli Ayup noted instances where individuals who had provided accounts later retracted consent or severed contact. One European witness (since 2017) shared forced labor experiences anonymously, then abruptly ceased communication. This pattern proliferated, with witnesses becoming unresponsive.

During her tenure as researcher for UTJD, co-author Tohti experienced physical surveillance in Türkiye (January 2022) while interviewing diaspora members. The team was persistently followed, and reports to the Norwegian embassy yielded no support. Witnesses

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reported contact by PRC police shortly after speaking with Tohti, including explicit threats against family members linked to their testimony. UTJD volunteers received messages from China-based relatives detailing increased scrutiny and requesting dissociation. This systematic repression caused significant attrition of UTJD testifiers and volunteers, severely impairing research capacity. Whereas previous trips yielded 40–50 testimonies, the team struggled to engage five. Similarly, Zubayra Shamseden confirmed a growing preference among witnesses for anonymity.

A significant consequence of PRC TNR is the rise of self-censorship. Bahtiyar Omer noted the perception that speaking out risks retaliation without tangible benefits, deeming it "pointless and harmful," which is counterproductive for documentation. Furthermore, Uyghur researchers encounter targeted disinformation and defamation campaigns via state media, timed to discredit new work (cf. UHRP and Oxus Society 2021). Sheffield Hallam University researchers were linked to extremism (*China Daily* 2022). Bahtiyar Omer was labeled a "terrorist and separatist" by Chinese authorities, accompanied by online defamation and doxing. These smear campaigns have material repercussions, affecting professional opportunities and aiming to sever researchers' institutional support. Beijing additionally employs lawfare against researchers documenting regional atrocities. In 2021, state media publicized civil litigation initiated by a Xinjiang enterprise against co-author Zenz, targeting research that identified the entity's complicity in state-imposed forced labor (Dou 2021; Zenz 2023).

Collectively, these testimonies indicate TNR functions as political control and structural violence aiming to obstruct atrocity documentation. When fear causes community members to shun initiatives or retract consent, authoritarian regimes achieve narrative control.

Summary: TNR at Intersection of Authoritarian Statecraft and Diaspora Resistance

Our findings demonstrate that the PRC's strategy of Transnational Authoritarian Control significantly impacts research and documentation of human rights abuses in Xinjiang:

1. **Obstructing Evidence Collection:** PRC authorities contact witnesses or threaten Xinjiang-based relatives before or after researcher interviews, precipitating disengagement (Safeguard Defenders 2023). Documentation volunteers encounter similar harassment and intimidation, leading to degraded research capacity.
2. **Cultivation of Fear and Self-Censorship in Diaspora Communities:** Community discourse frames testimony provision as harmful due to retaliation risks. This apprehension functions as a silencing mechanism, prompting self-censorship and deterring participation in documentation (Michaelsen and Anstis 2025; Schenkkan and Linzer 2021). Transnational repression erodes interpersonal trust, complicating community-based efforts (UHRP 2019; Tobin and Elimä 2023), while the denial of consular services forces researchers and community members into precarious situations (Safeguard Defenders 2023).

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3. **Discrediting Researchers and Their Findings:** State-sponsored disinformation campaigns undermine researcher credibility through false accusations of extremism and bias. PRC operatives pose as fake witnesses and impersonate staff of human rights organizations, adversely impacting researchers' professional opportunities.
4. **Inducing Psychological Distress in Researchers:** Researchers face direct intimidation, harassment, and surveillance. A lack of tangible support from host-state law enforcement and security agencies, even regarding documented threats, causes hypervigilance and anxiety (UHRP 2019; Oztig and Karluk 2025a).
5. **Exploiting Reopened Borders for Narrative Control, Co-Optation, and Coercion:** Beijing uses state-sanctioned travel to Xinjiang to co-opt diaspora members into compliance and self-censorship. Returnees undergo intensive interrogation, face pressure to inform on other Uyghurs, and are compelled to deliver scripted statements praising regional conditions. These dynamics fragment the diaspora community.

These findings highlight a significant deficiency in political and legal responses to acts of Transnational Authoritarian Control. While policy emphasizes asylum and resettlement, the ongoing, long-term security requirements of exiled individuals remain inadequately addressed. The absence of robust institutional follow-up regarding reported threats, failure to investigate credible evidence of foreign coercion, and general lack of proactive measures leave Uyghur researchers and documenters isolated.

MEASURING TRANSNATIONAL AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL

The empirical findings presented in this study highlight a significant evolution in the PRC's extraterritorial strategy targeting the Uyghur diaspora. They point to important gaps in existing scholarship on transnational authoritarianism. Scholars have attempted to categorize these phenomena as follows:

- By degree of repression or coerciveness, for example, the three stages proposed by Heathershaw et al. (2016) (cf. Furstenberg et al. 2021).
- By the authoritarian image management approach: promotional (promoting propagandistic regime narratives) versus obstructive (obstructing dissenting diaspora narratives) (Dukalskis 2021).
- By the role played by the host state: "cooperation incidents" (detentions, unlawful deportations, renditions) that require assistance from the host state, versus "direct attacks" (assassinations, assaults, disappearances) by the origin state in violation of the host state's sovereignty (Michaelsen and Ruijgrok 2023).

While these approaches have their utility, they do not conceptualize the full repertoire of extraterritorial practices and the divergence between mechanisms of control and their impact. Specifically, typologies of authoritarian governance frequently center on repression

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while undertheorizing the critical roles of co-optation and legitimation (Daminov 2024; Tsourapas 2021). Our findings demonstrate that tactics characterized by inducement can exert immense psychological pressure and achieve significant control, yet are scrutinized far less by the international community. This necessitates a more rigorous conceptualization that moves beyond repression to encompass the totality of extraterritorial authoritarian action.

Conceptualizing Transnational Authoritarian Control

First, the analysis of Transnational Authoritarian Control requires distinguishing the *mechanisms* of control from the *impact* they generate. To this end, we define coercion as the use of threats or the imposition of costs to restrict choice and alter the cost-benefit calculus of an actor, making non-compliance significantly costlier than compliance (Davenport 2007). Coercion relies on the threat of negative sanctions. In contrast, inducement refers to the provision of positive incentives (rewards or benefits) to encourage compliance, while persuasion aims to change another's beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors through appeals to reason or emotion (Wintrobe 1998). These three mechanisms must be distinguished from the impact they have on their targets in order to produce compliance. These analytical distinctions enable us to see how a less coercive mechanism, such as an act of co-optation, can have an equal or greater impact.

Second, it is important to distinguish the three *mechanisms* of Transnational Authoritarian Control (TNL, TNC, TNR) from the *dimensions* used to assess them, such as coerciveness and impact. By definition, TNR is inherently coercive. In contrast, TNC utilizes inducements, and TNL utilizes manipulative forms of persuasion. Therefore, TNL, TNC, and TNR do not form a spectrum of coerciveness. Rather, TNR is distinct by its reliance on coercive mechanisms. The distinction based on mechanism does not imply that TNL or TNC has less impact or exerts less pressure than TNR. As our empirical findings demonstrate, restorative inducements (a form of TNC) leverage profound vulnerabilities, generating immense psychological pressure that often exceeds the impact of low-level TNR (e.g., routine surveillance). This suggests that the impact of Transnational Authoritarian Control is not invariably correlated with the use of coercive mechanisms.

Furthermore, the three pillars of Transnational Authoritarian Control do not operate in isolation but are mutually reinforcing (cf. Gerschewski 2013). For instance, the pervasive climate of fear created by TNR (such as the threat of coercion-by-proxy) increases the vulnerability of diaspora members, enhancing the effectiveness of restorative inducements (TNC). The open-door policy is initiated via TNC but facilitates subsequent TNR, as travelers are subjected to interrogation and coercive recruitment upon arrival. It also enables TNL, as returnees are induced or coerced into spreading favorable messages about the homeland among the diaspora.

Table 3 categorizes the empirical findings from our interviews according to the three mechanisms, demonstrating that although TNR remains the most prevalent mechanism, forms of TNC and TNL are rapidly ascendant and provide the PRC with significant additional leverage.

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TABLE 3. Categorizing PRC Acts of Transnational Authoritarian Control by Mechanism

Mechanism	Related Research Findings
Transnational Repression (TNR)	**Physical Intimidation and Violence** Direct physical intimidation and explicit threats by actors based in the host country to deter documentation efforts. Overt surveillance, tracking, and prolonged following of researchers and their families during fieldwork or after public engagements. Targeted theft. **Digital Threats and Harassment** Persistent harassing communications. Online threats of violence and symbolic intimidation. Gendered digital harassment. **Coercion-by-Proxy** Retaliation against homeland relatives and associates. Forced communication from homeland relatives urging the cessation of activism or documentation work. Explicit threats of detention or harm against homeland relatives if researchers or witnesses refuse cooperation, continue activities, or provide testimony. **Administrative, Legal, and Diplomatic Coercion** Revocation, confiscation, or withholding of consular services (e.g., passports). Explicit threats of abusing international mechanisms (e.g., Interpol) and warnings of inescapable state reach. **Infiltration, Espionage, and Entrapment** Recruitment and deployment of informants within diaspora organizations and private social networks for extractive intelligence gathering and acquisition of private information. Deceptive offers of funding or collaboration that represent entrapment attempts or probes for vulnerabilities. **Coercion During Homeland Visits** Systematic interrogation of returning diaspora members. Coercive attempts to recruit visitors as informants on diaspora activities. **Social Isolation and Fragmentation** State intervention to enforce social isolation of activists. Severing of intra-diaspora family ties due to fear of state intimidation.
Transnational Co-Optation (TNC)	**Restorative Inducements (Restoration of Restricted Rights)** Strategic easing of travel restrictions and visa requirements for homeland visits and family contact. Conditioning the provision of consular services on active cooperation. Conditional offers of family reunification or travel permits for relatives in exchange for intelligence or compliance. **Additive Inducements (Provision of New Benefits)** Offers of material and professional benefits in exchange for collaboration, espionage, or propaganda participation. State-organized homeland tours designed to induce positive narrative sharing. Offering inducements to homeland-based relatives conditional on their success in dissuading diaspora members from political activity.

(continued)

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TABLE 3. (*continued*)

Mechanism	Related Research Findings
Transnational Legitimation (TNL)	**Discrediting and Defamation** State-sponsored disinformation and defamation campaigns targeting researchers. Official labeling of researchers as "terrorists" or "separatists," accompanied by online defamation and doxing. Global propaganda campaign frames reports of atrocities in Xinjiang as fabrications. **Narrative Manipulation and Disinformation** Deployment of intelligence operatives posing as victims to undermine genuine testimonies. Promotion of positive narratives about the homeland by visiting diaspora members. Dissemination of disinformation within diaspora circles regarding the safety of travel to the homeland. Global propaganda campaign portrays Beijing's policies in Xinjiang as benevolent.

Multidimensional Nature of Transnational Authoritarianism: Theorizing Transgressiveness

Current understandings of Transnational Authoritarian Control frequently center on degrees of coerciveness or overtness (Earl 2011). For example, digital or physical surveillance is conceptualized on the lower end of the coerciveness/overtness scale, whereas high-profile physical attacks are placed on the higher end (Furstenberg et al. 2021; Schenkkan and Linzer 2021). However, we argue that since impact is not solely determined by coerciveness, assessing Transnational Authoritarian Control requires a multidimensional framework. To conceptualize its measurement and understand the strategic calculus of authoritarian regimes, we introduce the dimension of transgressiveness.

Transgressiveness captures the extent to which an authoritarian action violates the established rules and norms of the international system and the host state, thereby determining the potential political cost (backlash, prosecution, sanctions) for the perpetrator. Transgressiveness is distinct from impact and overtness (visibility). We propose that transgressiveness encompasses two components (Alshadaifat and Silverburg 2021):

1. Illegality: The degree to which an action violates host-state sovereignty (territorial integrity, legal jurisdiction) and established international law (e.g., diplomatic conventions).
2. Illegitimacy: The degree to which an action violates recognized international norms, including human rights standards and expectations of appropriate state behavior.

Sophisticated perpetrators, such as the PRC, seek to minimize the *illegality* of their actions to avoid prosecution and diplomatic crises, while still employing tactics that may be high in *illegitimacy* and impact. This strategic preference aligns with broader trends in authoritarian innovation (Morgenbesser 2020). Modern autocrats increasingly utilize strategies

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that rely on manipulation, information control, and the appearance of legality rather than overt repression (Guriev and Treisman 2022). Transnationally, this manifests in tactics that exploit the gray zones of international law (Glasius 2018).

The concept of transgressiveness allows us to develop typologies of Transnational Authoritarian Control strategies by mapping it against other dimensions. We map transgressiveness against impact, defined as the resulting harm, psychological distress, or behavioral modification experienced by the victim. By utilizing impact rather than coerciveness on the Y-axis, this typology captures the pressure exerted by both coercive (TNR) and inducement-based (TNC) mechanisms (Table 4). This typology allows us to conceptualize the PRC's recent tactics against the Uyghur diaspora. The top-left quadrant, "Strategic Control," represents actions that generate high impact but are low in transgressiveness. This includes TNR tactics like coercion-by-proxy and TNC tactics utilizing restorative inducements. The conditional offer of homeland visits detailed in our interviews exerts immense pressure (high impact) but rarely violates host-state laws (low illegality). This combination is especially appealing to sophisticated perpetrator states, who can achieve significant control while minimizing the likelihood of an international backlash. It explains the expansion of the PRC's tactics in this quadrant. In contrast, direct physical intimidation (such as that faced by Memutcan Erkin in Türkiye) or assassinations fall into the top-right quadrant ("Flagrant Violation"), carrying higher risks for the origin state.

The expanded understanding of the dimensions of Transnational Authoritarian Control furnished in this section demonstrates that the OHCHR's current definition of Transnational Repression is sufficiently broad for capturing the full range of related tactics. By referring to any "acts" conducted or directed by states or their proxies to "deter, silence or punish" non-compliant behavior, the definition theoretically encompasses the categories of TNL, TNC, and TNR. In contrast, the European Parliament's definition centers solely on the repressive dimension. By focusing almost exclusively on acts of repression, multilateral bodies and much of the academic scholarship do not adequately conceptualize the full spectrum of Transnational Authoritarian Control.

TABLE 4. Mapping Transgressiveness and Impact

Transgressiveness Versus Impact	*Low Transgressiveness*	*High Transgressiveness*
High Impact	**Strategic Control** (Most strategic) e.g., restorative inducements (TNC); coercion-by-proxy (TNR)	**Flagrant Violation** (High risk) e.g., assassinations, renditions (TNR)
Low Impact	**Norm-Conforming Influence** (Narrative control) e.g., propaganda campaigns, nonthreatening disinformation (TNL)	**Illicit Interference** (Calculated risk) e.g., espionage, targeted surveillance (TNR)

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This limitation is particularly evident regarding evolving and innovative acts of TNC, which can result in significant harm while minimizing attention and backlash for the perpetrating origin states.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the PRC's evolving strategies of Transnational Authoritarian Control targeting Uyghur diaspora researchers and documenters. Our findings indicate the Chinese party-state employs a mutually reinforcing combination of Transnational Repression (TNR) and Transnational Co-Optation (TNC). While this approach has not dissuaded documenters, it has profoundly affected their mental health, witness availability, and community support for documentation. These developments point to a strategic calibration in Beijing's approach. Alongside coercive methods (TNR), the PRC increasingly relies on TNC, exploiting reopened borders through the conditional restoration of homeland access and family contact for acquiescence or collaboration. This strategy leverages state-manufactured vulnerabilities (like family separation) to compel compliance. The impact of this co-optative turn complements and even potentially rivals overt repression, amplifying intra-community fragmentation and reducing witness willingness to provide testimony.

Conceptually, these empirical findings underscore the need to move beyond the prevailing focus on transnational repression in scholarship and policy. Our study establishes that the targeting of accountability researchers is not solely a repressive act but involves a sophisticated interplay of methods. Consequently, we propose a multidimensional framework of Transnational Authoritarian Control that integrates repression, co-optation, and legitimation, while emphasizing the dimension of "transgressiveness." The PRC's strategy exemplifies a preference for tactics high in impact but low in transgressiveness, optimizing impact on targeted communities and individuals while minimizing illegality and evading international countermeasures. By reducing coercion's visibility and creating a deceptive appearance of normalization in the XUAR, Beijing undermines research and documentation efforts more subtly and effectively.

The PRC's Transnational Authoritarian Control strategy is a long-term effort to undermine the diaspora's sociopsychological foundations. This dynamic necessitates longitudinal research assessing the long-term effects of coercive and co-optative control. Moreover, understanding these extraterritorial dynamics requires analyzing transnational co-optation not as ancillary, but as a central innovation in the deployment of authoritarian tactics. While the PRC represents a maximalist case, this framework offers a diagnostic tool for analyzing how diverse actors, including illiberal or weak democracies, may externalize domestic security priorities to police dissent abroad.

The deliberate targeting of knowledge production via researcher intimidation and evidence obstruction carries significant implications for international accountability. Authoritarian states increasingly manipulate the conditions under which knowledge about their actions is produced, contesting the basis of international scrutiny. Democratic host nations, often lacking adequate countermeasures against low-transgression forms of Transnational

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Authoritarian Control that fall below the threshold of criminal prosecution, must recognize these strategies' sophistication. Cultivating diaspora resilience and developing policy responses attuned to the full spectrum of Transnational Authoritarian Control are therefore urgent priorities. ■

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